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SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: WORLD ANIMAL HEALTH ORGANIZATION
(OIE) on PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORTS

REF: A. Paris 217

1. On February 22, Senior OES Public Affairs Advisor Susan Povenmire met with Maria Zampaglione, Director of Communications of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), to discuss how the USG and the OIE might collaborate on avian flu public outreach efforts. US Mission for UNESCO Science officer and PA Officer also attended the meeting.

OIE PUTS THE ACCENT ON OUTREACH.

2. Zampaglione explained to Povenmire that OIE Director General Bernard Vallat has, since assuming his duties, taken a much more pro-active approach to public outreach than is normally the case for leaders of technical organizations; ten years at the French agriculture ministry during the BSE crisis had convinced him of the necessity of scientists communicating with the general public. His work over the past five years to establish a "communication mentality" set the groundwork for the OIE's ability to cope with the intense media interest fueled by the current avian virus epidemic.

...AND ON IMPROVED COOPERATION WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

3. Queried on the current division of responsibilities with other international organizations - including the WHO and the FAO - Zampaglione said that the OIE has taken a leading role in a committee on public outreach that includes many international organizations and stakeholders. This committee constituted a big step forward, as initial messages to the public from different agencies were discordant at the beginning. Daily contacts among concerned officers at participating organizations have helped. The positions of the WHO and FAO are now much clearer. The committee includes sub-groups on: risk reduction, media, behavior change, and containment. Research on existing educational material -- and possible gaps -- is key. The sub-group on risk reduction, for example, includes representatives of the OIE, FAO, WHO, the poultry sector, private industry, veterinary services, medical officers, and representatives of member states.

4. Queried on the division of labor between international organizations on implementation efforts, Zampaglione explained that the FAO deals with agricultural support for developing countries; it has a small unit dedicated to animal health. According to an agreement worked out at Beijing, the OIE deals with governance issues relating to animal health on the global and regional level, while the FAO is active at the national level. The strength of the OIE is in veterinary infrastructure and services. A major concern is that countries that do not have strong veterinary services will not be able to achieve early detection and response. For example, Nigerian authorities notified the OIE of the presence of the avian influenza virus on February 8, but the virus had first been detected January 9 -- OIE Director Vallat had stressed the importance of strong veterinary infrastructure and early notification as early as December 2004, Zampaglione noted. The FAO and the OIE carried out a joint mission to Nigeria. Joint OIE/FAO reference labs investigate the pathogenesis and epidemiology of avian influenza viruses.

15. Regarding cooperation with NGOs, the OIE maintains strong working relationships with many, including Veterinarians without Borders, even in the field. But the OIE does not do public outreach in conjunction with NGOs, because it would be difficult to select among the many eager NGO partners.

USG EAGER FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

16. Povenmire stressed USG eagerness to improve lines of communication with international organizations with a key role on this issue. She briefed Zampaglione on the international partnership on avian influenza, bringing together 88 countries at the ministerial level to leverage resources and share information and expertise; the next meeting will take place this spring, possibly in Europe. Povenmire also briefed Zampaglione on an upcoming March Conference in Atlanta that will bring together public health professionals to discuss surveillance, epidemiology, research, communication and training, as well as prevention and control; CDC is taking the lead.

17. Povenmire stressed that the USG interagency working group on avian influenza hopes to draw on existing material in its outreach work. On possible OIE-USG cooperation on public outreach, Povenmire evoked sharing of information sheets, and coordination of the translation of written materials. Zampaglione confessed that the OIE website, while complete, was not aimed at a general audience, but at policymakers and specialists; the site needs some work in that regard. The FAO site addresses more basic questions.

18. Zampaglione and Povenmire agreed that an important point to convey to the public is that avian influenza has not spread widely among humans. The positive aspect of the spread of the disease to Europe is heightened international awareness of the importance of transparency and of effective national systems of alert and surveillance, Zampaglione observed. Malaysia's performance has also served as a positive example. Zampaglione and Povenmire both observed that press coverage is now limited in Latin America. Although the rest of the world is in high alert, the OIE has had limited contact with Latin America. Queried on next steps, Zampaglione said that the OIE planned to work through its regional office in Buenos Aires.

OLIVER